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After I Have Voted by Laura Jensen

Edward Harkness

"Forest Altar, September," seems to affirm Levertov's acceptance of her own stance. There is a kind of humility in this poem as the Jewish woman prays her own unique kind of psalm. "If there is only / now to live," she says, "I'll live / the hour till doomstroke / crouched with the russet toad, / my huge human size / no more account than a bough fallen:" and the prayer that follows to the maker of "moss gardens, the deep / constellations of green, the striate / rock furred with emerald, / inscribed with gold lichen / with scarlet!", is somehow addressed to the same presence in the ashpit, the abyss. In "The Old King," she says:

> And at night—
> the whole night a cavern, the world
> an abyss—
>
> lit from within:
> a red glow
> throbbing at the chinks.

It is the creativity of the pit, something she believes to be at the center of the world. "For God," she says in "Poetry in the Classroom," "read man and his imagination, man and his senses, man and man, man and nature—well, maybe 'god,' then, or 'the gods.' " Whatever she is about her voice has found a toughness to accompany the reverence and compassion that brings us a thoroughly believable and moving poetry.

Edward Harkness

AFTER I HAVE VOTED
by Laura Jensen
The Gemini Press, Seattle. 1972
$1.00

Laura Jensen's first volume of poems is full of the world's strangeness, its violence and disappointments. Here's a sample:

> The Prairie
>
> They had expected something placid,
> a stream by a tree, leaves falling,
>
> something old and unfamiliar as a sleigh
> with the sleigh bells ringing.

They thought of the spring as sudden
and lasting, but that did not happen there.

Summer brought dark and heat
and lightning, and the days were clear.

It made the grass afraid; that was why it grew
to its tense and limited horizon.

They stood often in the meadow.
Once, when the sun had only risen,

they stood in the empty grass.

Many things in our lives, her poems reveal, cannot be explained, or are disconnected or peculiarly related. They are too unpredictable. In "This Is The Desert Of The Moon," she says:

(If 'moon' is feel and touch,
If 'desert' when that dries away.)
Words that have no beauty.
Words that have no story.

Before, the things were safety.
The radiator with the scrolled design
and the greek trees with the heavy leaves
would have stayed one on each side of me.

The people would have been more gentle.

I think this is a beautiful story, about a kind of comfort human beings can never provide, that can only come from familiar objects. And then there is the vast world of unseen dangers:

Now the Greeks howl through the trees at night
with hands in tangles and their hair on fire,
and on their backs are rifles.

Daylight is falling from image to image.
At night the stars are lost in horror.

The rainfall buzzes in the wires.
The jets scream shaking from the sky.
I am afraid to fly.
I am afraid of winter.
I am afraid of the silent holy snow.

There is a sense to these poems that won't leave me alone. As I read them I keep saying to myself, "Yes! Why of course! How true!" and feel as though I've spent my life wearing incorrectly prescribed glasses. The poems are a big help to me.

At her best, Ms. Jensen writes about frightening ordinary events, like "After I Have Voted," the title poem, which starts:

> I move the curtain back
> and something has gone wrong.
> I am in a smoky place,
>
> an Algerian cafe.
> They turn the spotlight toward me;
> the band begins to play.
>
> The audience stares back at me.
> They polish off their glasses.
> They ask the waiter, "Who is she?"

But sometimes, like now, she starts to have a little fun. The poem continues:

> He holds his pen
> against his heart.
> He speaks behind his hand.
>
> There are tea bags swinging
> from their mouths.
> Their teeth are made of brass.
>
> The jello sighs into the candlelight.
> My eyes turn into stars.
> Ah—the colored spangles on my clothes,
>
> the violet flashlights and guitars!

The speaker has become a great comedian and people applaud her with their own silly gags.

I spent a while looking for a bad poem in this collection. See for yourself. There aren't any. I did come up with what I believe is a weak line in "To Have You Hear":

> Two big umbrella butterflies (like Haiku elephants),

which I thought was glib, a little easy. But the last line makes up for it:

> It has been summer for weeks now,
> and you refuse to talk about it.

The most moving poem is the last, "Paul Starkey," an elegy in which the speaker recalls an awkward childhood playmate's clumsy attempts to write. Unnoticed, the speaker watches:

> Your mother was helping you make R's.
> It was hard to hold the pencil.
> The lines. They would not come together.
> Your mouth stayed open.
> You did not know that I was there.

In a way, this poem is about the pain of writing poetry, where even a single letter becomes impossible to put together. But it's also about another sort of pain, the small, simple kind that comes from the day-to-day struggle of having to sign your name.

Laura Jensen is someone to pay attention to. Her care with tone and timing, her sense of language's craziness and its odd lustres win my admiration. She has a daring and distinctive voice that comes from a mysterious place where, really, we all used to live. And she asks us to join her in crooning those ancient songs, as in the last stanza of "Talking To The Mule":

> Rub your nose along the fence.
> Tip back your head and bray,
> for night is yours. It is never
> against you. You are not its enemy.